He woke from his lovesleep refreshed and content, but alone this time. He had perfection in his mind, and his body felt as good as a gift. There was a note propped on the desk: "Jim, please meet me in hydroponics." Handwriting precise, no signature. Spock had freshed his uniform and left it neatly folded on the bed. He yawned and got up, starting for the head when he saw himself in the mirror. The heat lightening of lust weakened his knees and he braced himself on the mirror, as helpless as when Spock had placed him there.

This time it's true, he thought. I can't live without him. I would die any death, happy if it was with him. I want to die now because it can never be better than this. He leaned against the glass, thinking, that's how cool I seemed to him, and he could have kissed his own image for being what Spock loved.

He showered and dressed, checked the time, early evening, and walked through the corridors where the crew was moving freely again. He felt himself again, but with new strength, new power, the knowledge that Spock was waiting.

It was dark again in the garden, and he wondered why Spock had chosen it so soon after Dray's death, but forgot to wonder when he found the Vulcan curled up in the window seat of an observation bubble. He was watching the stars, strange rayed giants dopplershifted by the speed of the ship into alien colors and configurations.

Kirk settled back against the curved bulkhead, facing Spock. "You shouldn't let me sleep my life away."

"You looked so happy I couldn't bear to wake you."

"I am happy."

"I know," said Spock. "I would give my life to save that happiness for you."

A little tingle of premonition ran down Kirk's spine.

"I would give my life," Spock repeated, and this time the control in his voice showed, and the pain behind it.

"What's the matter?" Kirk's voice was sharper than he meant it to be, and he sat up, sweat prickling out on his back, on his forehead. "What's wrong?"

The answer took forever coming and came too soon. He could hardly hear over the triphammer of his heart, and he wanted to cover his ears, never hear at all.

"Nothing." Spock's voice was bleak, logical. "Nothing is wrong. The fever is over. Having mated, I live, as Vulcans do, without desire."

No.

That price he could not pay. Kirk knelt up on the seat and pulled the Vulcan into his arms, kissed him, all honey and fire, his love like a shout in his mind.

There was no withdrawal. The warm lips parted willingly under his, and when he gripped Spock tighter, the strong arms returned the pressure, but his mind shouted into silence, his heart beat alone. There was comfort in Spock's kiss, nothing more.

In pain too intense for speech, Kirk released him, letting his hands fall, open, empty.

Spock bowed his head. "Jim, I am willing to do anything I can."

Kirk remembered to breathe, willed himself to think, ignoring his body's protest, his soul's anguish. He had to think for them both, could not leave Spock bowed before him like a prisoner at the bar, could not accept that pitiful offer.

"All right," he said automatically, his mouth dry. "Don't--it's not your fault. Just wait a minute."

You served him, his base body protested. But it hadn't been that way. He had wanted Spock from that first moment in the shuttlecraft. Oh, God, how was he ever going to stop wanting him? Pull yourself together, Captain. You're alive. Spock's alive. You had perfection. More than most have. Say something. He may not feel desire, Oh, my love, but he feels. He hurts.

"You're sure, Spock."

"In that, too, I am Vulcan. I no longer have--even tears--to give you." He raised his face, and it was lined and dry in the faint light of the stars.

He can't even cry. A merciless hand tightened around Kirk's heart and he sobbed. At least I can feel. Spock misinterpreted the sound and offered all he could offer.

"If--if the pain is too great--if you desire it, I can make you forget."

But it's you I desire. A great fierce surge of all he felt, love, anguish, anger and price crested through him, brought him to his feet.

"Would you choose to forget?"

Slowly Spock rose to his full height, stood facing him, back to the stars.

"Before I forget what is worthy of love, I will forget my life."

Worthy of love. Only one way to deserve that.

Spock of Vulcan had loved him, and there would be no whining from the man Spock loved, no spoiling of perfection with anything less. Dray T'serek had gone gaily into the long night, Spock himself would have chosen any death before this living death. Surely the captain of a starship could walk unaided the twenty paces that separated them from the door. A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.

Take what you need, he'd said. And now Spock needed freedom.

He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders.

"Then I'll see you on the bridge, Mr. Spock."

Very much the Captain of the Enterprise, he turned and began his journey.